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AUTHOR McGettigan, Timothy
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes preliminary results from a study at the Crisis Control Ministry, a poverty relief organization in Winston-Salem (North Carolina). The intent of the study was to explore the nature of and influences on contemporary urban poverty by having the investigator serve as a volunteer interviewer at the Crisis Control Ministry. Another objective was to explore changes in urban poverty as a result of the sweeping welfare changes of 1996. An attempt was made to assess the potential for the severely economically disadvantaged people using the center to improve their standard of living. Accurately defining urban poverty requires that one evaluate carefully the manner in which social, economic, and political power structures balance with individuals' capacity to access opportunities and exert control over their life chances. Although the role of education is not explicitly investigated in this study, the lack of education is an important aspect of the social, economic, and political structures that contribute to urban poverty. The case studies of people interviewed in the course of the research show the limiting conditions of the urban poor, many of which have their roots in inadequate education and preparation for the workforce. A second stage of the study is planned that will focus more directly on the life events of many more Crisis Control Ministry clients. Oral history interview techniques will be used to obtain information about the people who use the crisis control services, their backgrounds, and their potential for self-sufficiency. One appendix contains the interview consent form for the planned study, and the other is a sample open-ended interview schedule. (Contains 21 references.) (SLD)

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Contending With Poverty:

Applied Research in a Community-Based Poverty Intervention Organization

ED 424 336

Timothy McGettigan, Ph.D.*

Wake Forest University

"Contending With Poverty"

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Timothy McGettigan

*Direct all correspondence to: Timothy McGettigan, Department of Sociology, Wake Forest University, Box 7808 Reynolda Station, Winston-Salem, NC 27109.

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Abstract

This paper describes preliminary results from a study at the Crisis Control Ministry, a poverty relief organization in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The intention of this study is to explore the nature and influences of contemporary urban poverty by serving as a volunteer interviewer at the Crisis Control Ministry. In addition, this study is timed in such a way as to explore changes in urban poverty in the wake of the sweeping 1996 Welfare reforms. As I have been engaged in the "applied" process of interviewing and delivering assistance to the Crisis Control Ministry's "clients" (i.e., individuals who request poverty relief assistance), I have also been able to gain an appreciation for the varied circumstances under which individuals encounter contemporary poverty crises.

Impoverished people must be able to access and exercise a significant amount of "power" (Gaventa 1982; Imig 1996) to overcome the stumbling blocks to effective participation in the social and economic environment. This project is intended to assess the potential that exists for those who are severely economically disadvantaged to improve their standards of living. Accurately defining urban poverty requires that one evaluates very carefully, and on a human level (Liebow 1995), the manner in which social, economic, and political power structures "balance" with individuals' capacity to access opportunities and, thereby, exert some control over their life chances. This research explores the "power" that is present in the lives of the urban poor—as both an inhibitor of opportunities (Gaventa 1982; Gans 1995) as well as a vehicle through which cycles of poverty may be interrupted.

Introduction

> Millions of Americans work full-time year-round in jobs that still leave them stranded in poverty. Though they pound the pavement looking for better jobs, they consistently come up empty-handed. Many of these workers are in my nation's inner cities. I know because I spent two years finding out what working life is like for 200 employees—about half African American, half Latino—at fast food restaurants in Harlem. Many work only part-time, though they would happily take longer hours if they could get them. Those who do work full-time earn about $8,840 (before taxes)—well below the poverty threshold for a family of four.
>
> Professor Katherine Newman (1995)

The goal of this project is to explore the nature of urban poverty. Day by day, the crisis of urban poverty grows worse (Rexroat 1994; Wilson 1996). "Daniel Weinberg, chief of the Census Bureau's Housing and Household Economic Statistics Division, said the number of poor Americans in 1996 totaled 36.5 million, representing 13.7 percent of the nation's total population." In addition, "On the health-care front, the number of uninsured children under 18 grew to 10.6 million (14.8 percent) in 1996; both the number and percentage were statistically higher than the 1995 figures of 9.8 million and 13.8 percent, respectively. Overall, an estimated 41.7 million, or 15.6 percent, of Americans had no health insurance during all of 1996. This number was up 1.1 million from the previous year…" (U.S. Census Bureau 1996).

In the twenty-four years since it began operating, the number of people that the Crisis Control Ministry assists on an annual basis has quadrupled. Crisis Control Ministry administrators estimate that during the 1990's the numbers of people they have assisted has increased each year on average by 14%. In 1997 the Crisis Control Ministry provided assistance for approximately 56,000 people. Furthermore, the administrators of the Crisis

Control Ministry are bracing for an unprecedented 20-25% increase in the number of people who will solicit assistance in 1998 due to the forecasted consequences of Federal Welfare reform measures.

Certain arguments (Herrnstein and Murray 1994; Lewis 1959) suggest that the persistence of nagging social inequalities is due largely to a variety of "deficiencies" in the culture and, thus, the character of specific groups of people. Herrnstein and Murray maintain that "the people I now refer to as the underclass are in that condition through no fault of their own but because of *inherent shortcomings* about which little can be done" (1994, p. 523 [emphasis added]). While the authors of such arguments are often willing to admit that the structure of social opportunities may be restricted, nevertheless, they often maintain that those individuals who are most willing and able to succeed in social "competitions" will have adequate access to opportunities. As such, the focus of many culture-character analyses of social inequality often fail to give weight to a variety of "pathological" (Wilson 1987, p. 21) social processes that arguably buttress the problem of urban poverty.

It has been suggested that urban poverty has been misunderstood due to a widespread inability to surmount stereotypical characterizations of the urban poor (Duneier 1992). Long-standing disagreements over the source of the urban poverty problem derive, I argue, fundamentally from questions concerning the nature and influences of social power, that is, from questions such as: Are people poor as a consequence of their unwillingness to apply a sufficient degree of personal energy towards surmounting the inadequacies of their individual situations, or are there environmental social dynamics at work that simply overmatch the capacities of

individuals to combat poverty? Before one can develop effective policies or programs to address the problem of urban poverty, one must first give thought to the question of whether poverty is a product of individual or societal exercises of power. If urban poverty is primarily due to a lack of sufficient individual motivation, then societal-level programs that provide reliable sources of relief for the poor will be likely to exacerbate the urban poverty problem—as Murray (1984) contends. However, if urban poverty is a product of social forces that preempt the abilities of individuals to develop self-sufficiency, then policies that treat urban poverty as an individual-level problem will, in their own way, increase the severity of urban poverty. Treating a social problem at the individual-level does nothing to address the systemic processes that drive people towards poverty and, therefore, such measures can do little more than provide forms of momentary relief for the urban poor.

The objectives of this study have been to explore the power dynamics that are present in the lives of people who are impacted significantly by urban poverty. Through observations, discussions and interviews at the Crisis Control Ministry, I have been able to develop a broader understanding of the influences that both individual-level and social power have upon the predicament of the urban poor. It has been my goal to seek answers to questions such as: What factors have brought people to depend upon the relief that the Crisis Control Ministry provides? What could have been done to prevent their need for such relief? What types of assistance are required to encourage and sustain self-sufficiency in the lives of the urban poor.

In other words, I have been interested in discovering what kind of intervention strategies actually "work." That is, which strategies make it possible for the people who

are seeking assistance to overcome their crises? Conversely, I am also interested in identifying what types of intervention strategies do not work. For example, strategies that either offer a "band-aid" for much more serious problems, or that "enable" unmotivated individuals to evade the challenges of resolving their own problems.

In addition, I believe that "power" also plays an important role in the perpetuation of urban poverty. Thus, I have sought to explore the degree to which the urban poor are able to access the means necessary to escape the clutches of urban poverty. Therefore, I have examined such issues as: Is it possible for people to develop the sufficient individual-level motivation to boost themselves out of a life of poverty? That is, do people have the "power" to overcome poverty, or do the social dynamics that drive people over the brink of poverty also create too steep an economic slope for the poor to ascend? What kind of "power" must be effected in order for the consequences of urban poverty to be overcome?

By analyzing the power dynamics that are at the source of urban poverty, I believe, it will be possible to understand and treat the problem more readily—to define policies that will apply "power" to the problem in such a way that people might be offered improved opportunities to change their lives for the better. In addition, it has been my goal to define the forms of power that produce and perpetuate poverty so that policies that are developed to treat urban poverty may, at the very least, avoid exacerbating the problem. The better the diagnosis of the urban poverty problem, the more likely it will be that "treatments" can be developed that have positive rather than negative effects on urban poverty.

Field Research at the Crisis Control Ministry

The methodological approach that I adopted to this project involves an intensive, intersubjective interview strategy (ethnography) that has been made possible by my engagement as a volunteer at what the eminent sociologist Robert K. Merton calls a Strategic Research Site (SRS). Scholars select their SRS because this is where they find the empirical materials that exhibit the phenomena to be explained and/or interpreted (Merton 1987, p.10). This project addresses one of the most important empirical questions of our time: How best to deliver adequate food, shelter, clothing, and employment to the millions upon millions of Americans who, for whatever reason, fall through the cracks of self-sufficiency?

The purpose of doing field research, or ethnography, is to situate oneself in a social location where one can better appreciate the day-to-day experiences of the people one studies (Atkinson and Hammersly 1994). This field research project has made it possible to make direct contact with a large number of people who are stricken by poverty. My interviews with the "clients" at the Crisis Control Ministry has provided a wealth of insights into the real life challenges and deprivations that pervade the reality of the contemporary urban poor. The descriptions of their lifestyles, hardships and needs offered a sometimes shocking portrait of the life world of the urban poor. In addition, the time that I have been involved at the Crisis Control Ministry has made it possible to observe their unique organizational approach to providing relief and assistance to the poor.

In order to receive assistance from the Crisis Control Ministry clients must participate in an interview process. After being processed through the intake procedure

clients are interviewed by crisis intervention interviewers. The interviewers then take the information and financial profile that they have obtained from clients to a lead interviewer. The lead interviewers in conference with the crisis intervention interviewers then decide whether or not to award assistance to clients.

The Crisis Control Ministry provides a wide range of assistance to its clients. Except on rare occasions, the upper limit on monetary assistance for any individual's request is $300. This amount was elevated in July, 1997 from the former maximum assistance level of $150 when another local poverty assistance program, Experiment in Self Reliance, discontinued their emergency assistance program. The Crisis Control Ministry never provides its clients with cash. Instead, if a decision is reached to award monetary assistance to clients, then checks are made out to businesses or other parties to whom debts are owed by clients. Most commonly, checks are written to help clients pay for overdue rent and utility bills.

While the Crisis Control Ministry provides a significant amount of assistance to clients for rent and utilities, perennially the Ministry's most substantial expenditures are for prescription medications. In 1997, *$1.6 million of the Crisis Control Ministry's *$2.4 million dollar budget (*these are estimations that were quoted by Velma Shore, Executive Director of the Crisis Control Ministry) was devoted to the purchase of prescription medications for its clients. In addition to employing a full-time pharmacist, the Crisis Control Ministry maintains an elaborately stocked pharmacy. Although the Crisis Control Ministry receives regular pharmaceutical donations, there is a constant need to purchase medications to maintain a basic inventory. When clients require

medications that are not available in the pharmacy, then the Crisis Control Ministry, at its own expense, arranges for clients' prescriptions to be filled at commercial pharmacies.

In addition to assisting clients monetarily and by providing pharmaceuticals, the Crisis Control Ministry also supplies food and clothing to those in need. Individuals and families are welcome to visit the clothing room once per season and take up to three outfits per person. The seasonal stipulation is intended to impose a limit on clothing room visits, but also to enable clients to have access to suitable clothing throughout the year. Clients in need of food are provided with a quantity of groceries that is sufficient to sustain a hungry family for between 5-7 days.

Although the Crisis Control Ministry provides such a wide range of relief and services that it could tend to "spoil" its clients (i.e., encouraging clients to depend upon the relief that they can access at the Crisis Control Ministry rather than stimulating clients to develop self-sufficiency), that is not the Ministry's mission. It is the explicit mission of the Crisis Control Ministry to "provide the kinds of short-term assistance that is required for individuals to turn their lives around" (Crisis Control Ministry Volunteer Handbook). Thus, rather than "ministering" to the poor in such a way as to make the poor complacent in their impoverished state, it is the goal of the Crisis Control Ministry to dispense its resources in such a way as to "empower" individuals. "We talk with clients about their responsibility to manage meager resources as best they can" (Crisis Control Ministry Volunteer Handbook). It is the goal of the Crisis Control Ministry to provide a safety net to its clients: to offer the kind of stopgap relief that will make it possible for clients to be able to contend "successfully" with crises that they would not otherwise be able to manage effectively. Thus, the Crisis Control Ministry is intended to provide a fixed

amount of resources to clients—who would otherwise be overwhelmed by their unfortunate circumstances—in order to preserve and enhance clients' self-sufficiency.

Indeed, the interview process is intended to elicit from clients not only what their crises and needs happen to be, but also—and, arguably, more importantly—how the assistance that may be provided by the Crisis Control Ministry will serve to resolve clients' crises and enable clients to recover their self-sufficiency. Although every client who visits the Crisis Control Ministry has some degree of need, many are refused assistance. It is the mission of the Crisis Control Ministry to provide assistance to clients only in situations wherein such assistance will result in a demonstrable improvement in the client's capacity to exercise self-sufficiency. In some cases, clients who are in the direst of need will receive either minimal or no assistance if it does not appear as though the assistance that is requested will "change" the lives of clients.

While, even with the recently expanded $300 assistance maximum, it may seem improbable that the relief that is provided by the Crisis Control Ministry could bring about a significant alteration in the lives of its clients. Nevertheless, on many occasions the limited assistance that the Crisis Control Ministry can offer has made it possible for clients to recover from illnesses, make car repairs, pay rent, eat, or successfully pursue a wide range of other basic activities. Although small in themselves, these forms of basic assistance have enhanced the capacity of many clients to house, care and work for both themselves and their families. Consequently, it is conceivable that the small amounts of assistance that are provided by the Crisis Control Ministry can indeed contribute to the institution of profound alterations in the pattern and direction of clients' lives. It is for such stories of success that the administrators, staff and volunteers at the Crisis Control

Ministry remain committed to the Ministry's mission. However, committed as the Crisis Control Ministry may be to enhancing the self-sufficiency of its clients, in some cases rather than fulfilling its mission the assistance that is provided by the Crisis Control Ministry produces effects that run counter to its mission.

There are many clients with very thick files at the Crisis Control Ministry. Thick files indicate numerous, repeated visits to the Crisis Control Ministry. Thus, by providing assistance to its clients, the Crisis Control Ministry is not assured that its clients will become increasingly self-sufficient. Indeed, in some situations, assisting clients appears only to increase the likelihood of their returning for more assistance.

In order to offer illustrations of the circumstances under which clients approach the Crisis Control Ministry for assistance—as well as to provide examples of the types of requests that are made by clients and the often circuitous process of interviewing clients—I have included the descriptions of four separate interviews that I have conducted during the past year. The purpose of including these descriptions is to illustrate how complex the issues of poverty assistance, self-sufficiency and "success" happen to be. As I have been able to learn more about the condition of contemporary urban poverty, I have come to find that it is a much more convoluted issue than I ever expected. Further, although I remain interested in assisting and ameliorating the condition of the poor, I have come to be much less confident of finding a singular "solution" to the problem.

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Examples of Client Interviews at the Crisis Control Ministry

Example 1: February 2, 1997

My first client on this day was a man named Michael who was making his first visit to the Crisis Control Ministry. Michael had been out of work for an extended period of time. He was the owner of a home that had come to him through his family and he had been able to assume ownership of the house after the death of his mother by paying the back taxes that were owed on the house.

Michael was trying to get his life back in order. According to Michael, the key to this process was to get some help paying his power bill. He was the owner of a home that was in, he admitted, a relatively sad state of repair. However, an essential part of the recovery process from his hard times involved having a home in which to live. Michael believed that if he were able to take care of his home, then his home would help take care of him. With a secure home Michael thought that he would be able to get a car (for $200 at the end of the month), keep a steady job and then make a habit of paying his bills on time.

These things, coupled with improving job opportunities—either doing laundry at PellCare or laying carpet—would, Michael was convinced, help to put his life in an upward spiral. The pieces of his fragmented life coming together and solidifying around having this house. He could live in his house with light and warmth, he would have a car to help him get and keep a decent job—which, in turn, would help him to pay child care and also house his adult son, who was on his way out of prison. It was clear that there had been some rather rough times in Michael's life. But this home seemed to offer the potential to make a lot of things in his life, and perhaps the life of his son, better.

Michael's request and rationale sounded very reasonable to me, however Betty, the lead interviewer to whom I took Michael's request, responded differently. Betty thought without verifiable employment, there would be no point in helping Michael beat the deadline for his power bill payment. I then had to take the unfortunate news to Michael that the lead interviewer had denied his request because he did not have a job. The Crisis Control Ministry does not like to pay for bills that in a month's time are only going to fall into arrears again.

I explained this to Michael and he was a bit annoyed because he said that, although he had not yet begun working, he did have employment. Michael explained that, he had just been hired for a job in the laundry room at PellCare, but he was still hoping to land a job laying carpet. The carpet laying job was preferable because it paid a higher wage. Nevertheless, Michael did say, that I could speak to his supervisor at PellCare and that person would assure me that Michael had, in fact, been extended a job offer.

I made the telephone call to PellCare and spoke to Michael's supervisor who assured me that Michael had been hired in the laundry room. Having that assurance I was able to go back to the lead interviewer and tell her that Michael did have a job—and, thus, he should be able to make his next power bill payment. Upon hearing that news, Betty decided that it would probably be a good idea to help Michael with his outstanding Duke Power bill. Betty wrote a check and Michael was extremely relieved when I gave him the news that he had been okayed for assistance. After receiving his check for Duke Power Michael shook my hand and departed from the Crisis Control Ministry in very good spirits.

Example 2: February 10, 1997

The second client with whom I spoke on this day at the Crisis Control Ministry was named Charlotte. Charlotte had 3 young children and she also had one more on the way. She had been forced to stop working recently because of difficulties with her pregnancy. Charlotte's income before having to take a leave of absence had been $130 per week. She said that she received $86 per month from Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) to help her care for her 3 kids, and she had not been able to receive unemployment after separating from her job. Charlotte had come to the Crisis Control Ministry in search of food and help with paying an overdue Duke Power bill. The case that Charlotte made for assistance seemed both modest and very reasonable to me. However, when I presented the case to Betty, the lead interviewer, she did her very best to throw it out on a technicality.

Due to stipulations by the Work First Family Assistance Program (WFFA), from whom Charlotte was receiving job counseling, it was not possible for the Crisis Control Ministry to consider helping Charlotte without a referral. I was forced to tell Charlotte that she would need to speak with her case worker at WFFA before she could be considered for assistance at the Crisis Control Ministry. I did attempt to reach Charlotte's case manager at WFFA, however her case manager was out of the office and the other people with whom I spoke at WFFA demonstrated a conspicuous lack of interest in helping Charlotte.

Despite all of this bad news Charlotte remained surprisingly pleasant and optimistic. Although, in the end, I could not offer Charlotte even a hope of assistance, as she got up to leave she thanked me for my trouble with a bright smile on her face.

Example 3: March 10, 1997

On this day, the first client that I interviewed was a man in a wheelchair, named Daniel, who needed medication for a urinary infection. Daniel explained that under normal circumstances he could capably look after himself. Daniel received a $771 Social Security Disability benefit on a monthly basis, however, recently he had an unexpected problem. Unfortunately, Daniel's ATM card had been stolen and his PIN number was in the envelope in which he had been keeping the card. Daniel admitted that it had been a bad idea to store his PIN number in the same envelope with his ATM card, and he was not going to do that anymore, but the damage had already been done. Before Daniel had realized that his ATM card was gone the thief had emptied his bank account. Although the crime was being investigated, Daniel was not optimistic of recovering his cash.

The theft of his ATM card had not only deprived Daniel of the money in his bank account, but it had also created a worsening financial crisis. Checks that Daniel had written had begun bouncing. Thus, as his bank's financial penalties began to mount, Daniel was also beginning to hear from unhappy creditors. Daniel was in an ugly financial mess. However, as nasty as Daniel's financial situation was getting to be, the only assistance that Daniel was seeking were the pills for his urinary infection.

Daniel had been in a Goodwill apprenticeship program. This is a work program that guarantees its graduates good jobs—jobs with benefits that pay living wages. Daniel had been in that program, but as a result of his health problems he'd been forced to drop out. Nevertheless, the people at Goodwill had indicated that it would be possible for Daniel to get back into the program when he was fit enough to do so. Thus, although the

financial problems that were looming over his head were ugly, he still saw a light at the end of the tunnel. Therefore, Daniel was not feeling too stressed out about his financial situation, but he certainly felt as though he needed his medication. His future was not going to get any brighter until he was able to get healthy.

I took Daniel's case to a lead interviewer, named Susan, and Susan was quickly convinced to assist Daniel with his prescription. In fact, as she listened to the whole of Daniel's dilemma, Susan expressed an interest in providing more than meager medical assistance that Daniel was requesting. However, as soon as she expressed her thoughts, she thought better of them. Although the Crisis Control Ministry could certainly afford to provided Daniel with some assistance towards the payment of his bill, Susan and I agreed that if Daniel thought he could solve his financial crisis on his own, then he should endeavor to do so without our interference.

Susan then filled out and signed Daniel's interview form. In turn, I took the form and Daniel to the pharmacy. As I left Daniel to wait at the pharmacy for his prescription I wished him the best of luck in regaining his health and recovering from his financial crisis.

Example 4 : March 24, 1997

The second client that I interviewed on this day was a woman named Miriam. She was very ill. Miriam had undergone open heart surgery on the 21st of March, the previous Friday, and she had been released from the hospital on Saturday, March 22nd. Thus, Miriam had spent a total of 24 hours in the hospital. She had been released on Saturday with enough pain pills and antibiotics to last until Monday—when, her doctors had told her, she would be able to get to the Crisis Control for more of the antibiotics and blood thinners that she needed to in order to survive.

Miriam was in a serious state of discomfort. As soon as I found out that Miriam had undergone open heart surgery, I dispensed with the normal questioning routine. It would have been inhumane to subject Miriam to the long series of questions about her address and financial information. Instead, I went directly to a lead interviewer. I was convinced that Miriam should get the medication she needed in a hurry so that she could get back to bed as soon as possible.

Fortunately for Miriam, I spoke with one of the more reasonable lead interviewers, Susan. Susan asked me to double-check about Miriam's health insurance status. Of course, Miriam had no insurance. If she'd had any insurance she would not have been kicked out of the hospital the day after open heart surgery. Nevertheless, Susan okayed the request for medicines. I took Miriam to the pharmacy and at the pharmacy met her son, Greg. Greg looked like he was about 20 and Miriam was in her late 30's. Greg asked me if I could get his mother a soft chair. I found her a soft chair, and I also got her a drink of water.

Greg asked me if it was possible to get some rent assistance for his mother—given that she could not work. I told him that it was likely something like that could be arranged and that it would require is a full interview. However, I added that their rent request should probably be handled on another day. He agreed and so did Miriam. I also encouraged them to request assistance at the Department of Social Services and at the Experiment in Self Reliance. Miriam and Greg seemed relieved by that response. I left them in the pharmacy to wait for their prescriptions.

Limitations of the Current Study

As informative as my experiences at the Crisis Control Ministry have been, my field research experiences have uncovered a wide variety of questions that cannot be answered effectively without modifying my methodological approach. The Crisis Control Ministry does not have the resources to track their clients and follow up on the impact that those resources have had on the lives of their clients. Given that the Crisis Control Ministry does not have the resources or labor-power to follow-up on the progress of the clients that they have interviewed, it is not possible to determine what the impact of the Ministry's efforts have been on the lives of is clients.

While the staff and volunteers at the Crisis Control Ministry sometimes are able to develop a profile of the progress of clients (due to repeat visits from some clients, or, more rarely, because they are contacted by clients who wish to apprise the Crisis Control Ministry of their progress), they are not able to systematically construct more elaborate post-interview profiles of clients' lives. Therefore, stage two of this research project is designed to explore more effectively the effects that poverty intervention organizations,

such as the Crisis Control Ministry, have upon the lives of their clients. Stage two of this research program incorporates a methodology that will enable me to move beyond the limitations of the single interviews that are conducted at the Crisis Control Ministry.

In the second stage of this research project I will employ interview techniques that facilitate the collection of much more in-depth interview data (life histories) than the crisis evaluation interviews provide for at the Crisis Control Ministry. In addition, the second stage of this research project will involve a series of follow-up interviews that are designed to document the impact of crisis intervention support on the lives of those who are afflicted by contemporary poverty. Furthermore, this project is intended to examine the course of the lives of the urban poor during a period of time that is synchronous with the enactment of sweeping Welfare reforms. Thus, an important component of this study will focus upon the degree to which the lives of the poor are impacted positively or negatively by contemporary Welfare reforms.

Stage Two

Stage two of this research project will begin by selecting a group of 100 clients who have active files at the Crisis Control Ministry. Clients will be considered "active" if they have been interviewed at the Crisis Control Ministry at some point during the three months prior to the inception of the second stage of this project. The sample will be drawn randomly from among the thousands of clients that have been interviewed at the Crisis Control Ministry. I will generate a list from which to draw the sample by compiling a roster—from the Crisis Control Ministry's computer database—of the clients

who have been interviewed during the previous three months. After completing the list I will employ a random selection technique in order to draw an unbiased sample.

After clients have been drawn from the list they will be contacted by letter to inquire as to their willingness to participate in this study. In the letter I will describe the purpose and structure of this study in order to apprise potential participants of the type of information that I will be asking that they provide, as well as to forewarn participants about the anticipated length and number of interviews. I anticipate that after this initial contact a number of clients will elect not to participate in the study. In order to make certain that a sufficient number of participants are willing to participate in this study, it may be necessary to select and contact additional clients from among the original pool of names.

Oral History Interview Techniques

It is my goal to use clients' applications to the Crisis Control Ministry as a pivotal "moment" in my study. I will employ oral history interview techniques in order to obtain a quantity of information about the people who avail themselves of the services and assistance that is rendered by the Crisis Control Ministry. Whereas the interview schedule at the Crisis Control Ministry is designed to explore and evaluate the immediate crisis in which clients find themselves, the goal of my interviews will be to develop more wide-ranging profiles of the lives and circumstances of Crisis Control Ministry clients (See Appendix II). My interviews will be designed to chart the life courses of my interviewees. In collecting this broader base of information I hope to examine a wide spectrum of variables (that are associated with both micro and macro-level concerns) that may

contribute over the course of an individual's life to the precipitation of "moments" of crisis which required that they seek the assistance of the Crisis Control Ministry.

Further, as I explore the circumstances and conditions that have produced clients' need to seek assistance at the Crisis Control Ministry, I will also endeavor to evaluate the potential for clients to put the resources that they have obtained from the Crisis Control Ministry to work to alter the course of their lives. In other words, it is the goal of the Crisis Control Ministry to provide the kind of support for individuals that will make it possible for those individuals to achieve self-sufficiency. As much as I am interested in examining the past events in clients' lives, I will also be interested in the present and the future. Throughout the course of my interviews I will evaluate whether or not clients have been able to employ the Crisis Control Ministry's support to advance towards self-sufficiency. I am interested in divining what type of impact organizations like the Crisis Control Ministry can have upon the lives of the poor. If the assistance that is rendered by the Crisis Control Ministry provides only a stopgap measure to sustain families who are immersed in poverty, then I would like to establish what sorts of measures, policies, programs or jobs would be required to make self-sufficiency a reality for Crisis Control Ministry clients.

Interview Process

The interview process will be carried out over a two-year period and will involve a total of five interviews to be conducted at varying intervals.

1. Initial Interviews
2. First follow-up (60 days)
3. Second (3 months)

4. Third (6 months)
5. Year Two
    a. Two follow up interviews (6 months)

Initial interviews will be designed to last approximately 2-3 hours and will follow a structured, but not rigid, interview schedule. There are many different paths that lead to both success and poverty and it is my goal to derive a greater grasp not only of the commonalties between the life courses of Crisis Control Ministry clients, but also of the variability and complexity of those life courses. Thus, the interview schedules will be kept somewhat open-ended so that the interviewees will be able to describe topics that they perceive to be of importance, but that have not been included as focal points in the interview schedules.

The focus in the initial interviews will be upon the interviewees' childhood, upbringing, family and career or personal life-work orientation. The goal of these interviews will be establish the self-definition of the interviewees. As such in the initial interviews the interviewees will be encouraged to tell stories about themselves that offer an account of who they think they are, how they came to be who they are and, critically, where they are both socially and economically.

The first follow-up interview will be less intensive than the initial interview. These interviews should last between 1-2 hours and they will focus upon the interviewees' lives in the present as well as their plans for the near and, if applicable, more distant future. The first follow-up interview will document the daily routines of the interviewees. This information will assist in the development of baseline criteria to evaluate the relationship between the goals and the activities of interviewees. With this

information I will explore issues such as: Are the interviewees engaged in efforts that will affect (i.e., improve, worsen or maintain) their disadvantaged situation? To what ends are the interviewees directing the assistance that they have obtained? If the interviewees have set goals for themselves are they making progress towards those goals? Are their goals feasible? Do the interviewees set goals so high that they cannot avoid failing—and thus avoid making realistic and earnest efforts to do more than live off of the largesse of poverty relief organizations and assistance programs? Or are there barriers that are simply too great for individuals to clear without an enormous increase in poverty assistance?

The remainder of the follow-up interviews will provide an opportunity to reestablish and update contact with the interviewees. Each of the interviews will return to the issues of poverty, economic disadvantage and the forces that are at work (e.g., individual, organizational, socio-cultural) in the interviewees' lives to continue, exacerbate or ameliorate their poverty crises. The timing of the follow-ups is to provide interviewees with substantial blocks of time during which to consider goals and enact change in their lives. While the blocks of time between interviews are substantial, they are intended to be brief enough to allow interviewees to recall the particulars of their actions—as well as the potential impediments to enacting their efforts.

Conclusion

There has been a great deal of discussion in recent years (especially during national election campaigns) about the failure of the "War on Poverty." Certainly, this "war" did not put an end to poverty, however, there is some evidence to suggest that not all of its battles were lost (Lemann, 1988). Precisely what the "solution" to poverty happens to be remains uncertain, nevertheless, I believe that effective treatments are possible. Much has already been done in the effort to combat poverty and, I believe, the most appropriate path for future efforts is to identify "winning battle fronts" and, so to speak, direct fresh troops and resources towards those fronts. In this study, it is my goal to identify the sources of success and failure in efforts to assist the poor. By doing so it is my hope that with a better battle plan the War on Poverty can still be waged with optimism.

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Appendix I: Interview Consent Form

Interview Consent Form

My name is Timothy McGettigan and I am an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at Wake Forest University. I am conducting research on the topic of "urban poverty and power." The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of intervention strategies on urban poverty. The Wake Forest University Institutional Review Board has approved this research project.

I would like to request that you participate in an "open-ended," tape-recorded interview. This means that I would like to have a discussion with you that is focused on your ideas about the nature of urban poverty in society. I will maintain your confidentiality in this interview by removing any and all identifying information from the recording and from its transcription. Keep in mind that your participation in this interview is completely voluntary and you should feel free to terminate the interview at any time.

In any interview situation there are potential risks for embarrassment or emotional stress that may be produced by revealing or even thinking about private matters. I would like to minimize those risks by reiterating that participation in the interview is strictly voluntary and should be governed by your "comfort zone." That is, you should only choose to participate if, or as long as, you feel comfortable in doing so. Furthermore, you should only talk about the kinds of things that you feel comfortable in saying.

If there is anything that you would like to ask me now, during the interview, or after the interview, please feel free to do so. I will be happy to answer any questions you have about my research or your potential participation in an interview. My office telephone number is (336) 758-5447.

You will receive a copy of this consent form should you agree to participate in my research. Thank you for your time.

_____ Date _____

Timothy McGettigan
Department of Sociology
Wake Forest University
Box 7808 Reynolda Station
Winston-Salem, NC 27109

_____ Date _____

Participant

Appendix II: Sample Open-Ended Interview Schedule

1. Name:

2. Age:

3. Home Address:

4. Date and Place of Birth:

5. Family:
    a. Size of Family
        1) Nuclear
        2) Extended
    a. Economics
        1) Parental employment
        2) Income
    a. Contact with Family
    b. Quality of Contact
        1) Positive Relationships
        2) Negative
        3) Duration
            a) Continuity
            b) Flux
    a. Evolution of Relationships
        1) Development of one's own family
        2) Structure and substance of relationships therein
        3) Similarity to previous familial relationships

1. Childhood Community:
    a. Community Structure

2. School experience
    a. Credentials and Certificates
    b. Highest grade completed
    c. In-School Experience
        1) Relationship with Teachers
        2) Interest in Academics
        3) Academic Success
        4) Scholastic Satisfaction
    a. Benefits of School-Work
        1) Impact on life chances
        2) Acquisition of job(s)

1. Employment History